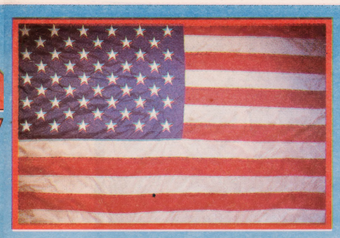
From The Bedroom To The Universe



That's what RADIOHEAD's contract with Parlophone Records said. And they were right. This time last year, Radiohead were playing to a few dozen hardcore fans in Britain. Twelve months on, the five-piece from Oxford are playing to a few thousand hardcore fans in America, having sold over half a million copies of their debut album, 'Pablo Honey'. PAUL LESTER travels with the band (currently on tour with Belly) from Rhode Island to Boston to New York as they go gold/global, witnesses Radiomania first-hand and meets the reflective human beings behind the hysteria. Wired and emotional: TOM SHEEHAN

Radiohead Born (Again) In The USA (l-r): Jonny Greenwood; Phil Selway, Ed O'Brien; (front) Thom E Yorke; Colin Greenwood

I'VE HEARD SCREAMING BEFORE, but nothing quite like *that*. At once exhilarated and anguished, it is the scream of a girl on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"I love you Thom!"

The scream is four syllables long, very sharp and extraordinarily loud, somehow managing to pierce the commotion of the Providence, Rhode Island, crowd and the noise blasting out of Radiohead's enormous PA.

"I love you Thom!"

There it goes again, sharper and louder now, a terrifying mixture of frightened child, ecstatic weenie and wailing banshee. Of course, I have no trouble hearing the scream – everyone in Club Lupo's, Jesus, everyone in *Providence* can hear this yell-from-hell; it's just that I don't seem to be able to work out where the f*** it's coming from.

"I love you Thom!"

That does it. I've got to find out who on earth is responsible for this orgiastic moan-cum-death rattle. So, as Radiohead build towards the climax of finale "Pop Is Dead", I wade into the fray, a claustrophobic crush of pretty preppies, frat-house freaks, cropped jocks, sweaty crowd-surfers and all-round American psychos.

And there she is, squashed between the "Beavis And Butt-Head"s, the tiny kid with the giant voice.

"Hey! Look at this!" the drenched (new) waif calls out, instantly recognising me from the hotel where Radiohead and The Maker have been staying and on whose doorstep she has been camping out over the last few days in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of her heroes.

The girl – Sharon Bouchard, 21, from Massachusetts – is shivering, not from cold, but like she's just seen a ghost, or Christ, or the ghost of Christ.

"Oh my God," she sighs, "that was the best thing I've ever seen. They are just awesome."

Suddenly, Sharon starts pulling up her sweatshirt to reveal her midriff. It is purple. So determined was she to get close to Thom E Yorke – Radiohead's singer, guitarist and reluctant messiah – that she braved the *mêlée*, risking, in the process, such irrelevancies as life and limb.

I guess that's the kind of thing you do when you're in love.

"He is *sooo* gorgeous," swoons Sharon, prodding at her equally bruised thighs and grinning, oblivious to the gawping hordes, oblivious to the *pain*. Clearly, she can't feel a thing. Obviously, she would do it all again.

"Course I would!" she beams. "Anyway, it doesn't hurt a bit."

Brett who?

I'VE seen bigger bands. I've seen better bands. I've seen U2 in Germany, New Order at Reading, Public Enemy at Wembley and Barry White in Manchester so, no, you can't possibly blame me for assuming I'd seen everything.

And I have, in a sense. But I've never seen five undernourished ex-college boys from the Home Counties inspire such reckless enthusiasm, such devotion, such *love*. I've never seen a fan letter for an "indie" band from a man in Death Row before. I've never seen a bunch tagged "ugly losers" by hacks in their home country make so many luscious teenies (male and female) on the other side of the Atlantic quiver and shake. And I've never seen a group of hicks from the sticks make some poor bastard stuck in a wheelchair at the back of a concert hall smile so hard he could cry.

I see all of this and more in America with Radiohead.

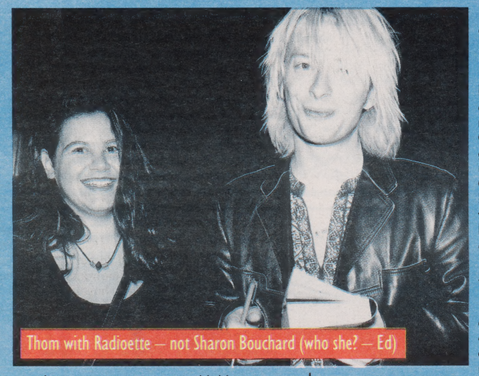
Yeah, *that* Radiohead. The Radiohead we all used to studiously ignore when they were called On A Friday. The Radiohead we sort of began to notice when their monument to misery, "Creep", crawled out of Parlophone last September. The Radiohead we begrudgingly gave press space to when their next slabs of caustic plastic, "Anyone Can Play Guitar" and "Pop Is Dead", scraped the charts (respectively, Numbers 32 and 42) and debut album "Pablo Honey" reached the Top 30. The very same Radiohead we pushed aside in our rush to sanctify Suede and who we're now being forced to (re-)assess in the light of the "Creep" re-issue (Number 7 with loads of bullets) and the band's impressive Stateside success – the LP has shifted upwards of half a million units while estimates suggest it will have sold a cool million by the end of the year.

Yes indeed. *That* Radiohead.

Embarrassed? *Nous*?

NO. Not us. Never. We know no shame and have even less pride. Besides, Radiohead, we now realise, are worth every cringing second of the shameless *volte-face* it takes to be granted an audience with them.

Certainly, Thom E Yorke – a man who seems to have taken Elvis Costello's early "Revenge And Guilt" persona and multiplied it severalfold – is becoming a fascinating figure at the centre of British pop. If the sensitivity, irritability, suspicion, rage and anxiety displayed in Yorke's words are anything to go by, he should be a chap with a chip the size of a small banana republic on his shoulder.



Thom with Radioette – not Sharon Bouchard (who she? – Ed)

And if the savage riffing and thrillingly conventional ("Music For Lapsed Rock Fans" is how I describe Radiohead later, to the band's assent) attack of the players is any measure, then Jonny Greenwood (lead guitar), Ed O'Brien (rhythm guitar), Colin Greenwood (bass) and Phil Selway (drums) will be bullish and brash, defensive and aggressive, in the mould of the young Joe Strummer and Paul Weller.

Wrong! Radiohead are disarmingly charming, articulate on every subject from representative democracy to *fin de siècle* Mugglestonian asceticism, erudite from morning till night and educated to the max. Their received pronunciation has more in common with royalty than rockers. And they could probably knock out the odd authoritative political column for The Guardian in their spare time.

I can't help wondering, as I watch Thom leave the Providence gig, head towards the tour bus and reduce a startled young female to a trembling wreck (Sharon Bouchard!), and the Greenwood brothers get swamped by autograph hunters, whether these strange (banal?) pop rituals are beneath them.

And I can't help wondering just who are these pale young men whose songs and sounds, eyes and skin, are exciting thousands of music lovers thousands of miles from home.

Radiomania in the USA!

"HE'S great, but what *is* his problem?" asked Steve Mack of That Petrol Emotion when he first saw Thom E Yorke at a Radiohead gig last year.

The crusty kitten-hunk had a point. Yorke may well be as much of a gentleman as the others in the band; it's just that he's rather more prone to bouts of moodiness. And don't forget that the enigmatic singer is the man responsible for this little litany of lacerating self-loathing: *"I'm better off dead"* ("Prove Yourself"); *"I failed in life"* ("Stupid Car"); *"What do you care when the other men are far, far better?"* ("Thinking About You"); *"All my friends said bye-bye"* ("Faithless The Wonder Boy"); and, of course, *"I wish I was special"* ("Creep").

Back in the Providence hotel bar, and bearing in mind his reputation for sporadic fits of pique, even black periods of nihilistic despair, I approach Thom cautiously and repeat that Petrol enquiry: what *is* his problem?

Nursing a bottle of Becks in the corner, he reasons, "I'm a lot of different people when I write."

I hear you've been in a steady, happy relationship for three years. How come you sound so haunted and hurt, fierce and f***ed-off/up in your songs?

"You can feel those things in any relationship," he explains, eyeing me from beneath his Cobain-ish blonde fringe, apparently unaware of the fact that Sharon Bouchard (again!) is spying on him, *à la* "Fatal Attraction", from a nearby table.

"Am I 4 Real?" he repeats. "Good question. I *am* sincere about what I do."

How about that line from "Faithless": *"I can't put the needle in"* – have you ever been tempted, in one of your more downer moments, to try hard drugs? Or were you just flirting with heroin imagery?

"I wouldn't be that pretentious to play the Kurt Cobain," he winces. "That phrase is more about trying to get back at people, get nasty."

Tonight, you introduced "Yes I Am" (the B-side of "Creep") by saying, "This is for all the people who shat on us." What made you say that?

"That was just. . . I wrote that song about the sensation of being the underdog for so long, and how suddenly everyone's nice to you. And it's like, f***you," he snarls, offering a glimpse of the human being behind the hysteria.

More glimpses: Thom was born in Scotland 25 years ago (it's his birthday on the day of this bar confessional. Ed and Colin present him with a book by leading dissident intellectual, Noam Chomsky), moving to Oxford when he was seven. His childhood was all right, but he hated his public school ("It was purgatory," he says. "It nurtured all the worst aspects of the British middle class: snobbery, lack of tolerance and right wing stupidity.").

After a tortuous failed romance ("Have you ever seen 'Who's Afraid Of Virginia Wolfe?' It was like that for a year and a half, lots of fighting in public."), Thom went to Exeter University where he studied English and Fine Art, shaved his head, started DJing and discovered he had a dangerous taste for drink ("I almost died from alcohol poisoning once," he shudders at the memory. "I lost it for a bit.").

Thom doesn't say whether or not things got so bad he ever thought about ending it all ("Might have done, might not have done," he half laughs), but he does agree with my theory that "Creep" is the exact inverse of The Stone Roses' "I Wanna Be Adored": the former is fuelled by self-pity, the latter by arrogance; both by egocentrism bordering on narcissism.

"Creep" is saying "I Wanna Be Abhorred", isn't it?

"Yeah, definitely," Thom is quick to agree but slow to disclose any more. "It's about [pause]. . . It's about sympathy [longer pause]. . . This is all very hard. If, erm. . . Yeah, I s'pose. Mmmm [very long pause]. . . As soon as I say this, everyone will take the piss. It's just, I think [pause for several centuries]. . . Part of me is always looking for someone to turn around, buy me a drink, give me a hug and say it's all right," he says at last, breaking the painful silence. "Because I just go off on one. For days I'm unbearable, I can't talk to people. And it shocks me because I'm still doing it. I want to be alone and I want people to notice me – both at the same time. I can't help it.

"There's this book, 'Famished Road', where the main character has these forces following him around and pulling him about – I feel like that," Thom continues to bare his soul and disprove the idea that commercial reward + public acclaim = emotional stability. "It sounds really tossy, this. If I was a painter it would be like, 'Wow! That's wonderful!' But this is pop and in pop you're not meant to say things like this."

'I wouldn't be that pretentious to play the Kurt Cobain' – Thom E Yorke

YOU are if you're Radiohead. You are if you're Thom Yorke. And you are if you're one of the dandy Greenwood duo.

Jonny is 21, Colin is 25. Their father died when they were young, leaving their mother to worry about her two wayward sons.

"She thought Jonny was being been dragged away by the forces of evil," confides Colin the day after the Rhode Island gig, chainsmoking Camel cigarettes inside the tour bus now parked outside the Avalon – the venue for tonight's Boston show. "She got a bit better after she saw us on 'Top Of The Pops'. Mind you, she thinks everyone on that programme is a drug-taking lunatic. Actually, she's not happy unless she's worrying. Very Radiohead, that. We're all worriers, you know. Even when there's nothing to worry about."

Jonny, who left Oxford Poly after one term to concentrate on the band, is Radiohead's resident musical genius, the Bernard Butler to Thom's Brett Anderson. Something of a prodigy at school, he played viola for the Thames Valley orchestra, then started hanging around with Colin and Co as soon as the group started. Pretty soon, all five members were sharing a house in Oxford, just like The Monkees.

"No, Banana Splits," corrects Jonny, joining me in the scorching Indian summer heat on the pavement – sorry, sidewalk – outside the Avalon. "Which of us was the father figure? No patriarchs! We were all mothers."

I ask Jonny whether he thinks Radiohead have achieved success in the States rather quicker than Suede because the latter are more of a tease and Americans mistrust ambiguity of any kind.

"Are we more boyish? Ooh no," he grimaces, genuinely peeved at my proposal. Jonny later admits to being more than slightly repulsed by a nipple ring given to him by a female fan who

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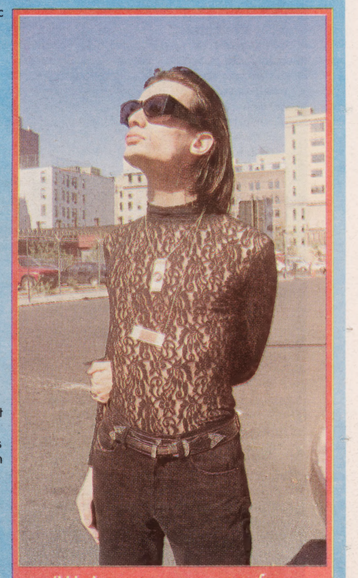

'We're a testosterone-free band' – Jonny Greenwood

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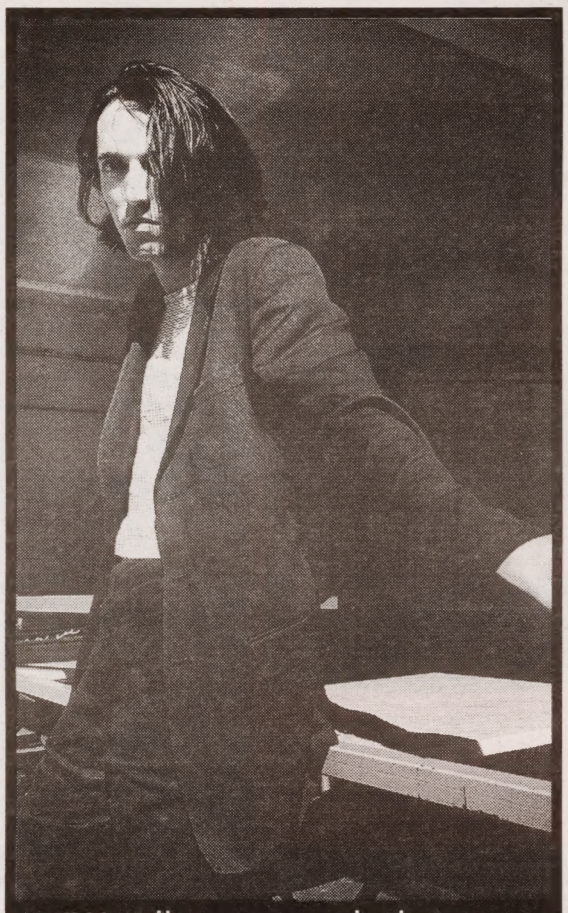
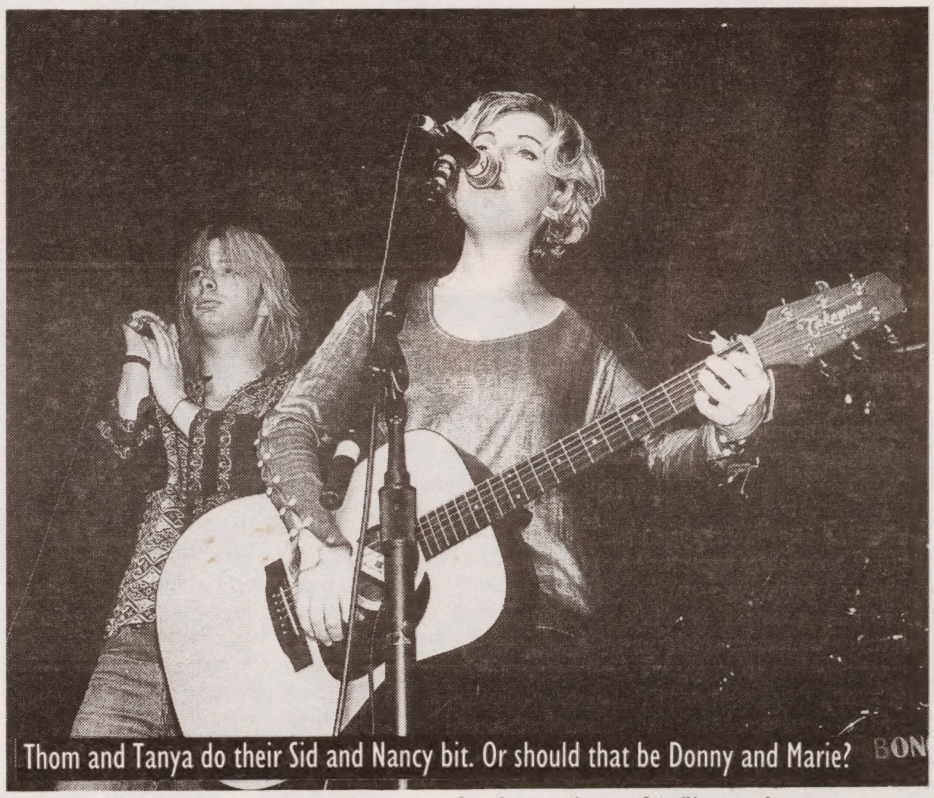


'We all pretty much shot our load at college' – Colin Greenwood



Thom and Tanya do their Sid and Nancy bit. Or should that be Donny and Marie? BON

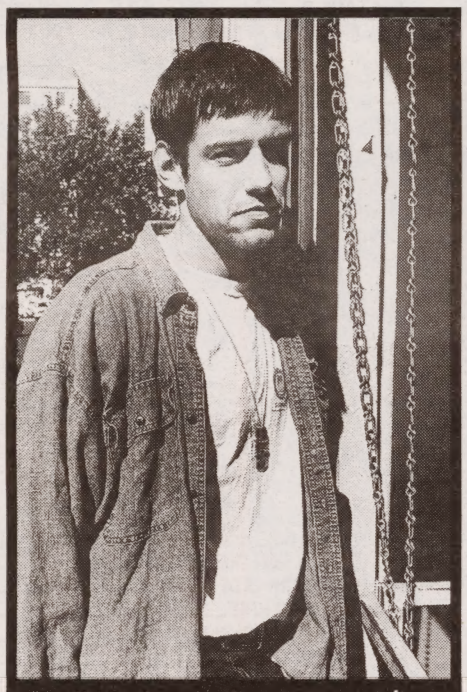
appeared stark naked at his hotel door a few nights ago, and asks me, at the end of our chat, not to mention the gender of his partner back home.

Meanwhile, Jonny's staring at the sun, telling me this: "We get fans of both sexes. Groupies? That's a terrible word. How Seventies. No, we don't get offers. We're not The Manic Street Preachers. We're a testosterone-free band. We didn't form this group to unleash our libidos on the general public."

Colin, who has a degree in English from Cambridge University, spent his formative years in the kitchen at parties with Thom, wearing black bodystockings and garish mauve and green shirts and generally, as you do, trying to halt the hegemony of goth.

Another of Colin's favourite pastimes was outraging the boys at school (Radiohead attended the same school, although, apart from Colin and Thom, they were all in different years) by getting off with their male friends.

Then he went to college and really let his hair down.



'We're quite a moral band' – Ed O'Brien

"We all pretty much shot our load at college in terms of drinking and drugs," admits the most candid member of the band, squinting at the sun coming through the bus window and closing the blinds as scores of Radiohead's new American fans mill about on the street below, waiting for their bass-playing idol to emerge.

"It was nothing extreme," he adds, sounding for all the world like an Oxbridge don with an epicurean bent. "Nothing more than speed or dope. Smack? No! People can't afford that indulgence in terms of time and money these days.

"I remember at college," he goes on, furiously inhaling and exhaling, "there was this chemist on the corner – it was the local methadone dispensing clinic. I used to walk past and see all these junkies queuing up. Then I'd walk round the corner and they'd be shooting up, which wasn't very nice. . ."

Colin has already informed me that Brett Anderson's celebrated remark – "I'm a bisexual who's yet to have a homosexual experience" – was lifted from notorious slacker manual, "Generation X". What about those early gay encounters of yours, Colin?

"Yeah, well. Yeah, well. Yeah!" he laughs, momentarily embarrassed, before divulging: "Well, yeah, I had a couple of flings at college with some guys. But my girlfriend knows about them, so it's all right. She doesn't like me hanging out with her gay friends in London too much, just in case I get tempted! I'll show you a photo of her if you want. She's a biker. She's more rock'n'roll than me. She's biker woman. She got through three bikes on our holiday in Greece.

"You know, I was the only guy in Greece on the back of a bike with a woman on the front!" he chuckles, leaping up to dig a photo of Madeleine, his crazy biker chick girlfriend, out of his travel bag.

ED is the only member of Radiohead who doesn't have a partner back home. There are advantages to this. For one, he has more money than the others (a homesick, lovestruck Colin has spent about £600 ringing Madeleine every night. Drummer Phil doesn't disclose a precise amount for his nocturnal calls to girlfriend Kate, but he does tell me he wishes he'd bought shares in British Telecom). For another, he gets to flirt with women on the road.

Like Tanya Donelly of Belly, for example, who – take note, True Stories fans – has just broken off her engagement with her US rocker boyfriend. Even as we speak, Radiohead's playmate, Tanya, is jumping down the steps of Belly's astrodome of a tour bus and interrupting my chat with Ed as we sit in the shade outside the Avalon.

"Sorry!" Tanya squeals in my general direction after bounding towards Ed to plant a big kiss on his cheek, that legendary "shark with lipstick" smile forming on her face. "I thought you were just some college geek doing an interview."

(Memo to 4AD: you can forget about any more Belly front covers.)

Ed's parents split up when he was 10, although he moved back in with his father in Oxford five years ago – he's 26 now, but his dad, a Happy Mondays fan, is pretty cool. After a regular adolescence ("I used to think girls hated me," he says. "I couldn't speak to girls till I was 17"), Ed went to Manchester University, then "did his Jack Kerouac bit", taking a Greyhound bus around America, exorcising most of his bacchanalian tendencies.

"Someone held a party for us the other night, and none of us went," laughs the handsome, blue-eyed, 6ft 5inch guitarist. "Drinking just depresses me nowadays. Until recently I was drinking very heavily and I loved it. But then it started to act as a depressant. I like to smoke dope a lot, but that's about it. Crack and coke? We've been offered it. I *am* intrigued, but. . . The same goes for girls – there's a hidden rule that no one goes with groupies. I hate that side of things, it's so dirty and seedy. It might be all right in a Guns N'Roses video, but it's not for us. We're quite a moral band, you know."

Beavis aka Michael O'Neil: 'Radiohead rock, man! Bigger than U2!'

I DON'T speak to Phil Selway – who only last night was stopped outside the band's tour bus by a girl and asked whether he was "the roadie or just a hanger-on? Oh, and can you get me Thom's autograph?" – until after Radiohead's storming appearance in front of 3,000 devotees at New York's Roseland theatre.

I know it was storming because Thom's skinny-rib black jumper is hanging over a heater pipe in the band's dressing-room after the gig and it is dripping with sweat. Really. Drip drip drip. I also know it was storming because all sorts of record company and MTV types are schmoozing and salivating and generally declaring Radiohead to be the best new band since whoever, the cure for all known diseases, etc etc.

You wouldn't know it was storming to look at Ed, who, after a puff or 27 of, well, puff, has got what he calls "the fear". And you definitely wouldn't know it was storming to look at Thom E Yorke. Evidently, schmoozing with record company and MTV types comes just below verruca removal on his list of likes. Fearing the onset of one of Thom's "moods", I drag Phil into the corridor and ask him why he thinks Radiohead have Made It Big in the USA, as opposed to, just to pick a name at random, Suede (interesting fact: Suede immediately faxed their congratulations on hearing that "Pablo Honey" had gone gold).

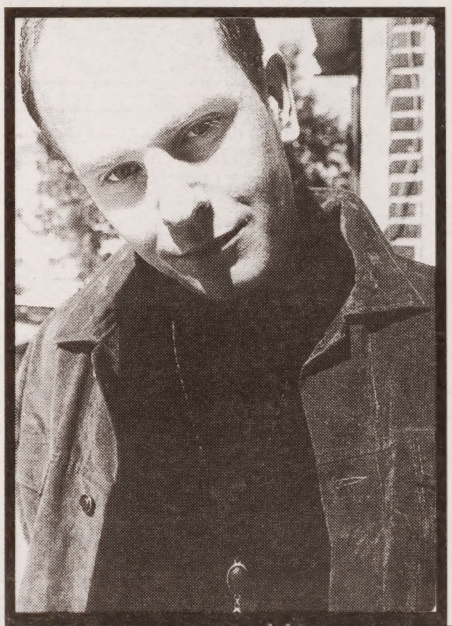
"Americans like our Englishness," says the drummer, Liverpool Poly graduate and former "Nightline" counsellor (true!), leaning against a drab grey wall. "It's a far more abrupt kind of Englishness than Suede's, more energetic, more frenetic and direct."

Just as Phil is getting into his stride, a rude American strides over to where we're standing and starts listening in to our conversation. Surreally enough, it turns out to be Michael O'Neil, production assistant on MTV, better known as the voice behind America's latest lobotomised cartoon cult, Beavis, of "Beavis And Butt-Head" infamy.

"Radiohead rock, man!" O'Neil/Beavis announces, unprompted, as Phil and I exchange looks of the "an Uzi, an Uzi, my kingdom for an Uzi" variety. "Are they gonna be big? Let's quote-unquote: 'Bigger Than U2'! Definitely. They know how to write songs, they know how to sing and they know how to play. They're cred. They've got attitude. They're alternative crossover! They're like Jim Morrison-meets-Jimi Hendrix. MTV love them. They're rockin' the country!"

Huh-huh, huh-huh. Only this time, the joker's not joking. Radiohead's acid anthems and simply twisted pop is just what Europe, America, the world ordered. One million people *can't* be wrong.

Can they?



'Americans like our Englishness' – Phil Selway

Radiohead's tour with James starts on December 1